Great Faith Abounds
Sacramentality in a Pluralistic Age

Glenn Ambrose

How should we understand grace, sacramentality, and salvation in our post–Vatican II globalized world? Ambrose utilizes council documents and subsequent scholarship to provide some important fresh thinking on these questions.

In Meeting Mystery, Nathan Mitchell puts forward a provocative reading of the story of Jesus’ encounter with a Syrophoenician woman that is especially relevant to contemporary discussions of religious pluralism. The story is found in Mark 7:25-30 and Matthew 15:21-28, but Matthew’s text is more congruent with Mitchell’s interpretation. The woman merely identified as a Canaanite is seen as challenging Jesus’ seemingly narrow, even exclusivistic, understanding of his mission. Mitchell discovers in this text an interreligious dialogue that begins badly, but ends with both parties positively changed by the encounter. That the woman or anyone else for that matter would be changed by an encounter with Jesus is not surprising to the reader. What is “shocking” is that Jesus “lets himself be changed by this pagan woman’s attitude” (Mitchell, 256). Mitchell purposely does not use the word conversion here. Citing Matthew 15:28—“Woman, your faith is great; let it be done for you as you wish”—he emphasizes that her faith is not his faith. Jesus is a Jew and remains a Jew. The woman remains a Gentile, but Jesus discovers that her faith is true, even great, despite being different. Moreover, she is not only different but would have been regarded by devout Jews at this time as unclean. But

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Jesus repeatedly recognizes great faith in those that are marginalized whether on account of alleged sinfulness, sickness, gender, ethnicity, youth, or, in this instance, religion.

Mitchell does not make this observation, but the fact that she remains unnamed, although largely due to her gender (see Schüssler Fiorenza, 11–13), could be read as indicative of her relationship to the Jesus movement. This unexpected encounter is an isolated incident, which is unique because this woman is not behaving according to contemporary conventions. There is no time for formal introductions and no set protocol. We can understand why she is unnamed at the outset of this encounter, but why after such a momentous exchange does she remain so? Perhaps it is because Jesus and his followers do not see her again. In other words, she does not become a member of their faith community. Nevertheless, her impact was significant enough to be recorded, and she is still remembered, though without name, two thousand years later. In this woman, Jesus found solidarity. She too loved her children, she too challenged boundaries and conventions, and she too was a person of great faith. As Mitchell recognizes, this pericope takes on new relevance in the context of globalization and religious pluralism. It challenges the Catholic community to be open to being stunned and changed in a positive manner by its encounter with religious difference.

Mitchell is not alone in arguing for a more pluralistic vision of Roman Catholicism (see, for example, the works of Dupuis, Fletcher, Knitter, and Phan). A greater openness to accepting the viability and truthfulness of other religious faiths is more common in our age. It is evident in the attitudes of many Roman Catholics, in the writings of theologians, and in the magisterium itself. Mitchell’s work is especially interesting because it focuses on what is in fact often most cherished and particular in religious traditions, namely, their rituals and manners of worship, and positions them in a pluralistic view of liturgy, worship, and sacrament. In this context of religious pluralism, questions about whether or not sacrament and sacramentality should be limited to the lives of Christians are being raised. Do only Christians have efficacious sacraments? Can only Christians concretely and consciously express their lives in a sacramental manner?

These questions, and no doubt many more, are in the contemporary horizon of theological thought and need to be consciously dealt with in sacramental theology. This task has been made easier by the development and acceptance of a broader and renewed sense of sacramentality. This was a revolutionary shift in sacramental theology when compared to the narrow focus on individual sacraments that characterized Scholastic works. But this shift should also be recognized as potentially making a significant contribution toward articulating a Catholic theology that meets the demands of our pluralistic era. This essay will highlight a few theological developments, historical events, and magisterial documents that appear to encourage the recognition of genuine sacramental encounters in other religious belief systems and practices.
Sacramentality and Grace

Together, sacramentality and sacrament lie at the heart of Catholic reflections on graced encounters with the divine. The primacy of God’s action in a sacrament has always been upheld, and in contemporary sacramental theology this is strongly indicated by the understanding of Jesus as the primordial sacrament. This sacramental view of Jesus along with the church as sacrament has moved discussions of the nature of sacraments beyond the two or seven ritual framework that had dominated Protestant and Roman Catholic thought. Although some ambiguity and critical problems lie in the notions of Jesus and church as sacrament (see Osborne 1999, 84–136), their general acceptance shows the necessity of grounding discussions of ritual sacraments in a larger framework of sacramentality. In addition, a “principle of sacramentality” that in one way or another affirms the potentiality of everything in creation serving as a means for a graced encounter with the divine is also an integral aspect of contemporary sacramental theology (Himes, 98–102). As a result, the understanding of individual ritual sacraments as events of grace begins with the affirmation of the sacramentality of creation and history. This invites questions concerning religious pluralism insofar as God’s loving act of creation and action in history is not understood apart from the intent of divine self-revelation. Can the efficacious presence of a God that loves all and is absolutely free ever be limited to a particular cultural and religious expression? Would not all religions and cultures serve as a possible locus for sacramental events?

Karl Rahner, whose influence in sacramental theology cannot be overlooked when considering religious pluralism, strongly affirmed the sacramental principle and its broader view of the sacramentality of creation and history described above. He was also instrumental in helping to articulate a concept of grace that has been prevalent in postconciliar theology. For Rahner, the world was always already permeated by grace (Rahner, 169). This in no way undermined the uniqueness of the seven ritual sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, which he regarded as special events. However, Rahner’s vision did reject any theology that saw the church’s ritual sacraments as exclusive channels whereby grace entered into a graceless world. This way of thinking about grace was a centerpiece of his theological anthropology, which posited an infinite openness to the

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divine as the existential condition of human being. Generally speaking, this was not an entirely new idea in the Christian tradition; it was congruent with a more intrinsic view of grace that in one way or another upheld the view that human beings possessed a supernatural orientation. Rahner can be understood as offering a modern-day apologetic for long-held concepts, such as Thomas Aquinas’s “obe-
diential potency” or beliefs, such as the Augustinian sense of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that enables us to abide in God and God in us.

It should be noted that Rahner was not alone in strongly affirming an intrinsic understanding of grace in the contemporary era. Hans Urs von Balthasar, along different lines, can also be credited for defending an intrinsic view of grace (Garcia-
Rivera, 77–82). This theology of grace, whether grounded in a transcendental anthropology (Rahner) or an analogy of being (von Balthasar), has had a profound influence on all aspects of contemporary Catholic theology. In sacramental theology, the emphasis on the sacramental structure of human existence is connected to this view of grace as all-pervasive and intrinsic. In this framework, an enriched and potentially more pluralistic view of sacramentality has emerged, especially when the humanity of Jesus is recognized as sacrament. However, the full implications of this theology of grace and sacramentality of human existence remain underdeveloped in Catholic theology and perhaps even suppressed in light of the cultural imperialism or ethnic chauvinism that still can be found within the church.

The Experience of Globalization

A s important as these and the many related intellectual developments are for contributing to the increased sensitivity and appreciation for other faiths, the experiences created by globalization have done the most to challenge both exclusivist and inclusivist models of religious diversity. In other words, the greater openness to other religions found among Roman Catholics is not primarily due to the works of contemporary theologians; instead, it is the experience of other religions that orients Catholics in this direction. Writings on religious pluralism are popular because they address these experiences. Of course, experiences of religious and cultural diversity are not always positive. Some begin badly and end badly. We should expect that negative exposures to other faith traditions as well as the very human fear of difference will continue to encourage exclusivist views in some. At the same time, positive and often more intimate encounters with other religions will continue to push many toward defending religious pluralism. The dark side of religious exclusivism (intolerance, cultural arrogance, violence, and authoritarianism) is well known. But we should not overlook a potentially dangerous side to a religious pluralism, namely, a relativism that can lead to spiritual apathy. A theology of religious pluralism not carefully constructed can lead not only to indifference toward other religions, but to one’s own tradition as well.
If a pluralistic understanding of sacramentality is a desirable goal, then how can cultivation of a religious or spiritual apathy be avoided? Of course, any true religious pluralism is shaped by an appreciation and reverence for other religions, which is the opposite of apathy! The genuine fear of religious pluralism and ecumenism, displayed in magisterial documents like *Dominus Iesus*, is centered on concerns about any message that suggests other religions are as noble and truthful as Catholicism. Is this not complete relativism? Will it not lead the faithful to ask, why be Roman Catholic? These are legitimate concerns and for that reason it is important that arguments for religious pluralism avoid complete relativism. This can only be accomplished when such arguments have and are widely perceived as having their genesis from within the fundamental teachings of a religious tradition. This allows one to opt for a vision of religious pluralism because they are a Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist, not despite the fact. Unfortunately, many past arguments for religious pluralism put aside or ignored real differences on account of an exuberant eagerness to discover commonality (for a sympathetic critique of pluralism, see Heim, 13–43). As a result, they relied on or conveyed the weakening or outright rejection of particular dogmatic claims (see Peters, 334–48). Certainly, a pluralist perspective requires reinterpretation of many traditional doctrines and dogmas given the fact that exclusivist paradigms have dominated religious systems of thought in the past. But reinterpretation need not be rejection, and more often than not the development of doctrine and tradition has historically sprung forth from a retrieval of a past perspective rather than an entirely new innovation.

The Second Vatican Council is a good example. Its modernization of the Catholic Church was facilitated by going back beyond the Scholastic era. Many of the most influential theologians at the council had begun their careers with the study of patristics, and, in some areas of thought such as sacramental and liturgical theology, much of the commonly perceived innovation was indeed a return to the earliest of traditions. Of course, Vatican II did more than renew the liturgy and change the theological paradigm. It also, importantly for the issue explored in this essay, marked the emergence of a truly global and multicultural church that gave rise to a new appreciation of the many cultures of Catholicism. The catholic nature of the church as a unity-in-diversity is now seen not only as a healthy present and future reality, but also as something that extends back through history. This is a vitally important first step toward embracing a pluralistic viewpoint. The Other outside the confines of one’s tradition and community cannot be embraced apart from coming to recognize and accept the Other within.
Turning to magisterial writings, several teachings and common themes found in the documents of Vatican II should be noted for having laid a foundation for greater openness toward other religions and a broader sense of sacramentality. First and foremost, the council's official endorsement of the ecumenical movement and its acceptance of a limited sense of religious pluralism made the development of a more pluralistic view possible, if not inevitable. The inclusivism or openness toward the presence of truths in other religions described in *Nostra Aetate* may be deemed insufficient by many theologians today, but it should be recognized as a major development that needs to be more integrated with a contemporary understanding of sacramentality. In addition, common themes such as the universal call to holiness, the affirmation of temporal endeavors, the attitude of respect for cultures, and, above all, the emphasized connections between liturgy and ethics, all encourage a vision of what Rahner called the “liturgy of the world” (see Skelley).

Timothy Brunk provides an excellent overview of the council's contribution to understanding the sacramental life of the church, especially in connection to everyday life in this world (Brunk, 9–19). He specifically draws attention to *Lumen Gentium*, no. 34, which is worth quoting in full.

> For all their works, *if accomplished in the Spirit*, become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ: their prayers and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, even the hardships of life if patiently borne (see Pet. 2:5). In the celebration of the Eucharist, these are offered to the Father in all piety along with the body of the Lord. And so worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, *the laity consecrate the world itself to God*.

In this section, the actions of ordinary life are recognized as potentially sacramental. Eucharist is seen as a thankful giving wherein the whole body of Christ makes an offering. In the Spirit, the laity, certainly thankful for and in response to the offering of Christ, give themselves in their daily lives. The sacramentality of the lives of the faithful is thus seen as a fundamental element of the ritual sacraments of the church. This extension of worship or sacramentality beyond a purely cultic celebration directed vertically to God alone is not a new insight. Eucharist and hospitality are intrinsically related in the practice of the early church (McCormick, 48–50). Paul goes so far as to declare that the community in Corinth is not even celebrating Eucharist if the needs of the poor are ignored (1 Cor 11:17-34). Going back further in the tradition, the Hebrew prophets remind Israel time and time again that it is not the burnt offerings at the Temple that the Lord finds most pleasing, but rather the ethical witness of the community (Isa 1:11-17; 58:5-7; Amos 5:22-34; Mic 6:6-8).
The reference to works accomplished “in the Spirit” is also intriguing when thinking about sacraments and religious pluralism. Can only those who know Jesus Christ and profess faith in him as the Son of God live in the Spirit? Are only Christian acts of charity to be regarded as sacramental, as revelatory of and in response to the Spirit of God? Of course, Lumen Gentium is not addressing those questions. Elsewhere in this document, Christian activities in the world are seen in the context of the laic exercise of the common priesthood. Thus, “in the Spirit” above should not be interpreted apart from the ritual sacraments, in particular “the regeneration and anointing of the Holy Spirit” in baptism (Lumen Gentium, no. 10). Works of the common priesthood accomplished in the Spirit may be a necessary component of the ritual sacraments of the church, but it appears that they are first made possible by the exercise of the ordained priesthood. Nevertheless, “in the Spirit,” in light of the universal call to holiness when understood in connection to an intrinsic view of grace and a respect for different cultures necessary for a multicultural church presupposes a wider view of sacramentality that seems ripe for pluralistic development (see Phan, 257–78). In other words, the regeneration of the Spirit of God through baptism in Christ is a Christian way, but is it the only way?

Mitchell’s argument for a more pluralistic view of sacramentality suggests it might not be the only way. He draws attention to three principles found in documents of Vatican II and developed in papal encyclicals that could be interpreted as an evolving theology of religious pluralism found in the magisterium. The first principle is the “mystery of unity,” which refers to God’s plan of salvation recognized as universal and operative in the very act of creation itself (Mitchell, 254). Everything, every time, and everyone is touched by this all-embracing plan. In other words, God was at work in human history well before Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Moreover, this presumes God is presently at work in communities that do not trace their history back to Abraham or Jesus. The church understood as “sacrament of the world” must be understood in light of this mystery of unity; a unity we should recognize as a unity-in-diversity insofar as church as sacrament does not equate the church with the kingdom of God nor does it presume that the church monopolizes God’s saving action. On this later point, Mitchell quotes Jacques Dupuis:

[T]he one divine plan of salvation for all peoples embraces the whole universe. The mission of the Church has to be understood within the context of this plan. The Church does not monopolize God’s action in the universe. While it is aware of a special mission of God in the world, it has to be attentive to God’s action in the world, as manifested also in the other religions. (Dupuis 2005; quoted in Mitchell, 253)

Attentiveness to God’s action in other religions need not be interpreted as losing sight of Christ. Indeed, it is the special revelation of Christ who died for all human
beings that teaches Christians that all are called to share in the same divine destiny. This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit in a manner known to God alone as confessed in *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.

The mystery of unity as described by Mitchell presupposes the second principle alluded to in the above quote from *Gaudium et Spes*, namely, “the universal action of God’s Spirit in the World” (Mitchell, 254). In defending this principle, Mitchell draws on the writings of John Paul II, who on several occasions spoke of the universal presence and activity of the Spirit (see *Redemptoris Missio* and *Redemptor Hominis*). The late Pontiff’s affirmation that the Spirit affected not only individuals but entire peoples, including their cultures and religions, led him to conclude that there was a “radical, basic and decisive” unity found across cultures and religions (John Paul II, 1986; quoted in Mitchell, 255). This certainly provides a strong foundation for the inculturation of the Gospel and a truly multicultural church. But in a pluralistic age, it also challenges the Christian community to go beyond the metaphor of transplanting the Christian Gospel in rich native soils. Belief in the universal action of the Spirit calls for not only an openness but an expectation to discover in other gardens indigenous bushes that burn just as brightly with the glow of God’s Spirit. Most significantly, this is a Spirit that burns without consuming, thereby preserving the “dignity of difference” as evident in the Christian experience of Pentecost (Gittins, 12–13).

Lastly, Mitchell draws attention to the “universality of God’s reign” (Mitchell, 255). Much of Jesus’ healing and teaching ministry can be taken either as a description or embodiment of God’s reign. Thus, of the three principles, this one is the most distinctly Christian as it is rooted directly in the central message of Jesus. It is then by this regard a particularly strong foundation for a *Christian* theology of religious pluralism. Mitchell draws attention to the most prominent image of God’s reign utilized by Jesus, namely, “dinner.” As a dinner, Mitchell writes:

> God’s reign, as Jesus saw it, was neither a place nor a program, but a meal to which all peoples in all times and places are called to participate, and during the course of which it is the task of Christians not to preside grandly but to be the kitchen help, the servers. . . . (Mitchell, 255)

But in an age of pluralism, especially in light of the legacy of colonialism and the darker side of the hegemonic forces of globalization, a just banquet takes on the character of a multicultural and interreligious potluck as each and everyone brings to the table fruit from their gardens recognized as both gifts of the Spirit and work of human hands. The communion at such a banquet will have the character of a genuine dialogue creating the condition of solidarity and peace that sacramentalizes the presence of God.

Taken together, these three principles shed new light on the meaning of evangelization. When evangelization is understood as a unilateral witness of God’s
Spirit only manifested fully in Christian history, it will encourage an assimilating conversion, one that not only desires to make everyone Christian, but usually Christian in a manner that conforms to Anglo-European culture. Dupuis, in defending the dignity of difference, has argued that Christian evangelization needs to be recognized as both proclamation and dialogue (Dupuis 2005; see also Gittins). From a pluralistic perspective, the goal of evangelization is not an assimilating conversion, but regeneration brought about by an increased awareness of God’s action in the Spirit inside and outside the confines of the Christian community. In the act of proclamation, the church demonstrates its faithfulness to Christ, but in dialogue its knowledge of the Spirit of God is tested. Genuine dialogue and recognition of the Spirit of God in the other has been slow to develop, but the Christian community can find both solace and courage in the story of Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman. Both were committed to their faith traditions but open to change as evident in their mutual recognition of great faith.

**Conclusion**

Some theological developments in postconciliar Catholic theology, especially those in sacramental theology, seem to imply and encourage a more open form of pluralism than the inclusivism first defined in *Nostra Aetate*. When these intellectual developments combine with the experience of globalization, tremendous pressure is asserted on church leaders to clearly define official teaching. Mitchell, as shown above, utilizes magisterial writings to support a more pluralistic view of liturgy, worship, and sacrament. However, it would be more accurate to characterize the magisterium as ambivalent on this matter. While a strict exclusivism conflicts with official teaching, a limited inclusivism, one that insists on the absence of the fullness of truth in other religions, remains dominant as evident in *Dominus Iesus*. With this alleged defect in other religions, the possibility of genuine sacramental encounters in other religious belief systems and practices remains doubtful. At most, people of other faiths can have partial or “anonymous” encounters with the divine that still leave their cultures and religions in greater need of Christian evangelization.

There is a profound respect for culture articulated in many magisterial documents. For example, *Fides et Ratio* states that all cultures are “open to mystery” and capable of receiving divine revelation. However, this positive evaluation of all cultures stops well short of defending a theology of religious pluralism. Divine revelation, which is understood as a/cultural and a/historical, seeks to be embodied in the cultures of all people. But this presupposes an instrumental view of culture that is akin to the instrumental view of language rejected by contemporary philosophy and most notably by many sacramental theologians (see Chauvet, 3–17). In this perspective, the Gospel can be translated into any culture. Cultures
do not need to be eradicated with the arrival of Christian missionaries. The fact that *Fides et Ratio* indicates that “no culture can become the criterion for truth” is certainly superior to and corrective of the cultural arrogance that has been a part of the history of Christian evangelization. However, a purely instrumental view of culture makes it difficult to live up to this vision as evident in the extreme caution exercised by Rome in matters of cultural diversity in liturgical celebrations. An excessive hermeneutics of suspicion will continue to be exercised toward indigenous and non-Western cultures, while at the same time a naïve hermeneutics of generosity toward what is regarded as normative by the dominant culture will inhibit self-critical thinking. As a result, present and future evangelization will be a somewhat unilateral process of translation, and past evangelization as well as cultures of the past will be subject to nostalgia and sentimentality.

But a different, noninstrumental or postmodern, model of culture and divine revelation is also possible (see Phan, 218–22). If the Spirit profoundly touches all cultures, thereby making “religion the substance of culture” as Tillich asserted (Tillich, 248), then embracing cultural diversity, so clearly supported by the magisterium, is not only in tension with a limited vision of inclusivism, but also encourages an acceptance of genuine religious pluralism. And with respect to the sacramentality of human existence, culture itself as an extension of human embodiment should also be understood as having a sacramental dimension. In this context, divine revelation is not passively received as in an instrumental model, but actively expressed in all peoples, cultures, and religions. If there is indeed a “radical, basic, and decisive” unity found across culture and religions as John Paul II claimed, it is not only due to the presence and action of the Spirit but also on account of a faithful human response. Human responses to transcendence in other cultures and religions will certainly be different and, on some occasions, they will manifest great faith. The tremendous respect for culture that is expressed in many magisterial documents could be read then as an affirmation of the possibility of authentic religiosity and consciousness of God's Spirit in non-Christian culture and religion.

The task of Christians, indeed the task of human beings, is to respond to God's Spirit in whatever place, time, or culture they find themselves. Christian faith teaches us to trust in God's efficacious presence whenever or wherever the human community exists. This demands that we honor and revere all culture and religion as just as potentially sacramental as our own. Potentiality signals the necessity of genuine dialogue and critical thinking. While Roman Catholicism can offer a theological perspective that establishes sacrament and sacramentality as a universal potential, it cannot lose sight of the fact that sin is a universal reality. No culture or religion will be perfect. At best, they can only be on the way. Moreover, not all cultures and religions (or interpretations of them) are equal. A culture or religion that sanctions slavery must be regarded by Christians as in conflict with living in the Spirit.
The profound respect for culture in magisterial writings, especially those of John Paul II, and the desire for a deeper understanding of liturgy, worship, and sacrament in a pluralistic age invites the recognition of a true potentiality for great faith in other cultures and religions. While relativism is a genuine concern, exclusivism is a clear and present danger that not only maligns the dignity of difference, but threatens our very existence. A Catholic theology of religious pluralism can affirm that great faith abounds because of its belief in sacramentality, grace, and the universal presence of the Spirit. This makes it possible for Roman Catholics to enter interreligious dialogue with confidence and trust that the discovery of sacramental encounters in other religions will lead us all deeper into the mystery that lies at the origin and goal of human life.

References


